

What's Radical About the Liberal Arts?

The leaves are turning brown, the students are filling up Harvard Yard, and the mass emails are filling up my mailbox, all reminding me that I would be starting junior year right about now if I hadn't left Stanford. For an academophile like me, this inspires no small amount of nostalgia, and so I've been eager to get my hands on a copy of Michael Berub's bestseller, *What's Liberal About the Liberal Arts?* (Copies had been checked out of all the nearby libraries, so I spent the morning sitting in the Harvard Coop reading the entire book there. Yeah, I'm such a cheapskate.)

The book is a response to the conservative attacks on academia as a leftist preserve in need of some affirmative action for conservatives. In response, Berub outlines a two-pronged plan for handling conservatives in academia; an outline of a procedural liberalism for the liberal arts. First, in the classroom, conservatives should be given "reasonable accommodation" for their views, just like any other student in the class. Second, in the professoriate, conservatives should try to reform academia by joining it, just as the women's liberation movement did in the 1970s.

For the first, Berub gives examples from his own classroom: a conservative makes a claim (e.g. the Japanese internment was justified), Berub patiently acknowledges it, points to sources supporting and opposes it, and sits down with the conservative outside of class to give them further attention. Berub comes off as unfailing patient and gracious, while the conservatives appear wrong-headed and often simply lazy.

And yet. Despite my enormous sympathy for Berub — I tried to do my part to oppose Horowitz and hanging out with the AAUP's Graham Larkin at Stanford is one of my more cherished memories — I can't help imagining myself in the position at the conservative. As Rick Perlstein (a mutual friend) has noted, sometimes the only friends the far-right can find are on the far-left. For / [was once almost tossed out of class once](#) for my political views (in that case, insisting that the US didn't attack Vietnam to fight the spread of Communism).

Berub's clear writing, intelligence, and thoroughgoing kindness made me want to hop the next flight to Pennsylvania and audit his classes. (Thankfully, he closes the book with two lengthy chapters summarizing two major courses that he teaches, somewhat saving me the trouble.) But had Berub been my teacher, would things have been different? One disagrees with Berub at one's own peril — his snark is sharp enough to take your head clean off — but having seen his dismissive blog commentary on leftists, I can't help but wonder.

His not-as-left-as-thou attitude carries over into the book as well. When conservatives attack a professor for claiming Israel is a "racist state", Berub doesn't defend him but instead mocks the professor's attempts to defend the comment. And when the discussion turns to students who are fans of Michael Parenti (are there any?), he foresees only two possibilities for their future: either they renounce Parenti or they dumb themselves down to his level. I'm no fan of Parenti, but it takes an awful lot of confidence to say the only people who could agree with him are idiots.

Berub longs for intelligent conservatives that he can debate, but when it comes to intelligent leftists, he just wants to mock. But even if he treated them the same, I'm not sure it'd be much better. The "I see where you're coming from, here's someone else who makes that argument" trick — while eminently reasonable — is incredibly effective at robbing a young person of their moral indignation. It suggests that the question isn't one to be resolved, but simply one to be accepted as a fact of life: some people believe the Vietnam War was to fight Communism, others disagree. But when we're talking about the lives of millions, such ambivalence is more frustrating than outright disagreement.

Berub discusses this too, in his penultimate chapter on postmodernism (a discussion of how he discusses topics by discussing the topic of discussion!). I can't say I was convinced by his positions in the Lyotard-Harbermas debate or the Rorty-Nagel one, but the discussion did spur me to more thoroughly codify my own. And really, isn't that what the liberal arts — at their best — are about? Whether through a combative debate with a partisan or a paternalistic moderation of the subject by a procedural liberal, any time a teacher gets a student to refine their views counts as a win in my book. The essential thing is that the question — and the position — be taken seriously.

More serious is the second question: what do we do about groupthink in the professoriate? Berub makes the convincing case that academia's lack of conservatives is simply because it isn't a very good job for them. I know that if I was a young conservative, I'd be [riding the conservative gravy train](#) instead of spending years in graduate school. The cost-benefit analysis isn't even close.

But clearly academia isn't completely infallible. How do you change the culture of a field when it's gone off-course? Berub's suggestion is that you just play by the rules and stick to your principles. His example is the women's liberation movement, which succeeded in turning feminism into a real mode of literary criticism. But that seems like a somewhat atypical case.

What about economics departments, filled with professors whose theories neatly support right-wing social principles but rarely conform with any external evidence? What about psychology departments whose claims and experiments all-too-often make a mockery of the scientific method?

No self-respecting scientist would admit to being interested in a pseudoscience like psychology. If you tried (as I have) your friends would loudly mock you for it. And if that doesn't dissuade you, they start wondering if you're really as smart as they first thought. After all, why would anyone intelligent go into such a bogus field?

I certainly don't support an Academic Bill of Rights or any such nonsense — I want to improve academia, not destroy it. In fact, I don't have any great ideas for solving these problems. But I also don't think it's fair to simply dismiss them, as Berub seems to. The self-reinforcing groupthink of academia is a problem; it prevents exactly the kind of critical sharpening that I argue is the best part of education. And as a structural problem, it would seem to require a structural change.

This is, to be clear, not the meat of Berub's book, which spends its first half mocking the conservative critique on academia and the second summarizing Berub's own classes. Indeed, I don't think the proposals I'm responding to account for more than a couple paragraphs of the text. Nonetheless, those were the paragraphs that provoked my thoughts, so now I'm defending them, just like a good student should.

You should follow me on twitter [here](#).

October 4, 2006